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ABSTRACT

The present research attempted to contribute to the study of loneliness by examining the factors that comprise the phenomenological construct of what is referred to as loneliness and by aiding in identification of its antecedents. Subjects (N=526) included 228 males and 298 females from all walks of life and varied demographic backgrounds. Data collection was conducted in a group setting, in which subjects who had been assured of their anonymity were asked to describe their loneliest experience with their thoughts, feelings, and coping strategies. Subject responses were categorized. A model of loneliness was constructed on the basis of study data. The model consists of four major elements (self-alienation, interpersonal isolation, agony, distressed reactions) which can be described as "super structures." Ten factors define and differentiate the major elements. Factors are further differentiated by 23 components. The content analysis yielded a multi-clustered model of the antecedents of loneliness with the clusters of relational deficits, traumatic events, and characterological and developmental variables. Four factors were found to be most common in causing loneliness: loss, inadequate social support system, personal shortcomings, and crisis. (ABL)

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LONELINESS: THE EXPERIENCE AND ITS ANTECEDENTS

by

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INTRODUCTION

The present research attempts to contribute to the study of loneliness by examining the factors that comprise the phenomenological construct of what is referred to as LONELINESS, and aid in identifying its antecedents. Below is a brief description of our subjects and the procedure we employed.

Subjects

Five hundred and twenty-six subjects (228 males and 298 females) participated in the present study. They came from all walks of life and had varied demographic backgrounds. Average age of subjects was 33.7 years, with an average grade 12 education. 34% were married, 40% single, 9% divorced, 9% separated, 5% widowed, and 3% common-law. In other words, 37% were involved in a relationship, while 63% were single at the time of our study.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted in a group setting, in which subjects who had been assured of their anonymity, were given the following instructions: "Please describe your loneliest experience. We would specifically like to know your: a) thoughts, b) feelings, and c) coping strategies. You are not

asked to provide your name." In addition to the request for written accounts of loneliness, the author held some short meetings and informal discussions with subjects following completion of the written exercise.

Analysis of the Data

No prior hypotheses about the nature of loneliness were formulated. My approach to the analysis of these descriptions of loneliness was not to use any theoretical orientation or preconceived categories but rather to "see what is there!" Consequently, no existing questionnaires were used, nor was a new one developed. The goal was to examine how individuals would respond to the instruction, "Describe your loneliest experience."

The present analysis proceeded by scanning a randomly selected sample of loneliness accounts to determine the categories to be used in the analysis. When these categories seemed to repeatedly provide an exhaustive analysis and to accurately describe the material, research assistants were chosen. I trained psychology students from Sheridan College and York University to score the loneliness letters according to the presence or absence of each category. Criteria and descriptions of each category were provided. Interrater reliability, calculated on a total of 36 written accounts, ranged from 77% to 96% with an overall average of agreement of 94% on the categories chosen.

Example of a Loneliness Account

Subject 421 was a 47-year-old recently separated female. She had struggled within her marriage, had to "fight" in order to get out of it, and at the time of writing was struggling to survive out of it. Her account describes the deep and terrifying feeling of loneliness that engulfed her upon realizing that she is alone, solely responsible now for her three children.

> I looked around the room, here was my own apartment at last, I have waited all the years of my life for it. I had gone from father's house to husband's house and finally I had left there and taken off on my own. This is what I had wanted all along but as I looked around at the faces of my friends I felt lonelier than I ever had before. I quietly left the party room and went into the bedroom and sat on the bed. I wanted to identify my feelings. It was as if a void was slowly opening inside me, an almost physical sensation of stretching open and nothing there, blackness and sadness, hopelessness. I was alone and completely unable to relate to another living soul. No one knew how I felt or cared and I desperately wanted someone to care. I didn't know how to let them know I needed them, all those party people

in the next room. The loneliness was like a heavy weight on my head and shoulders, it was a burning in my throat, a wall of unsheddable tears behind my eyes, a soundless scream of pain in a world bereft of compassion. It was darkness and coldness and dread of death and oblivion."

THE LONELINESS MODEL

The model of loneliness which was constructed on the basis of the present data has three levels. First are four major elements which can be described as "super structures". Ten factors define and differentiate the major elements. Factors are further differentiated by 23 components (see Table 1).

Due to time limitation I will only describe here the major elements and the factors.

It should be noted that individually these elements are not unique to loneliness. For instance, self alienation is one of the experiences schizophrenics report; also, emotional pain exists as a condition on its own or is the byproduct of depression and other

reactive or pathological conditions. However, it appears that only in the experience of loneliness are these four elements combined to create a unique phenomenological structure. Others have identified the same elements, although no research to date has yielded a model of loneliness which incorporates all four of them.

Self-Alienation

Self-Alienation describes a feeling of inner void, a detachment from one's self, and an alienation from one's core and identity. A feature of loneliness previously addressed by Moustakas (1972), Mayer Gaev (1976), and Rokach (1988) is the factor that comprises the major element, namely Emptiness and Self Void.

Interpersonal Isolation

When people think about loneliness, they often associate it with Interpersonal Isolation. It highlights the feelings of being alone (emotionally, geographically, and socially), of not having a sense of belonging, and of lacking a meaningrul relationship. Three factors

comprise this element: Absence of Intimacy, Perceived Social Alienation, and Abandonment.

Absence of Intimacy refers to the lack of a close, intimate, and caring relationship. It captures the deep sense of lack of a relationship which, when present, can contribute to a sense of well being and belongingness.

Perceived Social Alienation is the factor that illustrates one's perception of being socially alienated, unwanted, and alone. It is important to note that we are dealing here specifically with a perception rather than the objective reality. Consequently, it is possible that objectively one is not actually rejected or unwanted but one may, nevertheless, perceive oneself to be alienated. Furthermore, this factor is not equivalent to what has been described as social isolation, which was seen as a cause of loneliness. In other words, this factor does not point to the reality of being isolated and away from important ones or from people in general. On the contrary, most of the subjects felt most alienated when they were surrounded by others to whom they could not connect.

Agony

Loneliness is always associated with much pain and suffering. It is impossible to talk to the lonely and hear their stories without noticing the confusion, hurt, and pain they go through. The major element of Agony addresses the inner turmoil and emotional upheaval, the vulnerability, aching, and anger that the lonely experience.

Inner Turmoil refers to the inner searching for answers and insights, the desperation to understand, to see one's way through the maze of pain and agony.

Emotional Upheaval is frequently associated with loneliness and suffering. It is the affective determinant of loneliness and includes a host of emotions that revolve around pain, hurt, and unhappiness.

Distressed Reactions

The pain and suffering of loneliness, which at times can be very acute and distressing can be experienced at many

levels. Whereas Agony portrays the inner turmoil and confusion of the lonely, Distressed Reactions highlight the physiological, social, and cognitive distress experienced by the lonely.

Physiological and Behavioural Distress refers to the various somatic and behavioural manifestations of the stressful conditions that the lonely endure.

Self-Depreciation relates to the negative cognitions and perceptions that a lonely person has of him or herself. North America is a "couple culture". It expects and rewards those who are in heterosexual intimate relationships. The Western culture is also preoccupied with success. Success is shared by those who reach goals that are valued by society. One cannot be considered successful without being part of a couple. Being lonely is thus interpreted as failure.

Growing up and living in a society that frowns on failure and loneliness, it is almost unavoidable that people associate self-depreciatory thoughts and feelings with the experience of loneliness. They have failed in the eyes of society and they have nothing of which to be proud.

Self-Generated Social Detachment deals with the social detachment and lack of closeness to others that is self-generated. Sullivan (1953) and Weiss (1973) suggested that loneliness is actually a driving force that motivates people to initiate social interactions. Intuitively, one may agree that this could be a beneficial approach in an attempt to end loneliness. However, participants in the present study reported that the deep and acute pain, the suffering, upheaval, and agony suffered by the lonely may be so disturbing and unsettling that the person cannot associate comfortably with others. On the contrary, the pain and vulnerability require some "space" or detachment from people, both as a measure of protecting one's vulnerable self, and as an attempt to minimize further hurt that may be caused by attempts to associate with others, especially if one also holds self-depreciatory attitudes.

Immobilization includes what Fromm-Reichman (1959) described as "paralyzing hopelessness and unalterable futility". It is probably a response to the pain and anxiety of loneliness and is akin to the shock that one experiences following a traumatic event (i.e., death of

a loved one, or being involved in a car accident). This factor, unlike all the other ones, appears to be a homogeneous one and includes such sensations as being suspended in space, paralysis, being shocked and energyless, and "feeling stopped in time".

Descriptors of Loneliness

Moustakas (1961) referred to loneliness as an "experience of raw sensitivity" (p.8), of being all alone, feeling unwanted and disconnected from others and overcome by the intense pain and terror of the realization of loneliness. Young (1982) defined loneliness as "the absence or perceived absence of satisfying social relationships, accompanied by symptoms of psychological distress" (p.380). Results of the present study are supportive of these definitions and suggest that there are three factors that occur most frequently in descriptions of loneliness: Emotional Upheaval (22.0% of the responses), Perceived Social Alienation (21.2%), and Inner Turmoil (21.1%) (see Table 1). In other words, when people think about, or recall loneliness experiences, they most often remember, and have probably been most affected by (a) their

perception of being alienated from others or even abandoned by those who are important to them, (b) their vulnerability, devastation, and despair, and (c) the host of emotional reactions they have experienced.

CAUSES OF LONELINESS

The content analysis yielded a multi-clustered model of the antecedents of loneliness. The model depicts three conceptual clusters: Relational Deficts, Traumatic Events, and characterological and Developmental variables.

RELATIONAL DEFICITS

The relational deficits cluster includes three factors: (1) social alienation, (2) inadequate social support system, and (3) troubled relationships.

Social alienation addresses the physical isolation that one who is away from one's own environment experiences. This is complicated by one's inability (or perceived inability) to control the situation, its nature or duration.

Inadequate social support system addresses the unsatisfactory social support system, lack of friends and people who care, or unavailability of an adequate support system for one's needs. The support system may

be crippled or the individual may feel that he, or she, does not belong. A crippled social support system refers to a support system which is ineffective or unable to meet the individual's needs; or to one's inability to change the situation and develop a more adequate support network. A crippled system is a disappointing one. Subjects related that their loneliness stems from a support system of which they had high expections but which did not fulfill their needs and did not provide the support which was so essential to them.

Troubled relationships refer to the unwholesome, or disharmonious marital or non-marital intimate relationships in which the person is involved. Those are relationships which are marred by distancing, lack of intimacy, ineffective communication, or lack of closeness and affection. Disharmony in a relationship can be conceptualized as a continuum ranging from unfulfilling relationships which do not realize their potential, to grossly lacking or abusive relations. Relationships which are unfulfilling are not "bad" or outright unhappy ones, but are unable to fulfill some important needs for its participants.

To summarize the material presented about the Relational Deficits cluster, it should be pointed out that it conveys, in part, a similar idea to Sullivan's (1953) discussion of not belonging or not feeling part of, and further develops the concept of an unfulfilled need to be part of a special/specific relationship which was seen by Weiss (1973) as the root of loneliness.

TRAUMATIC EVENTS

The Traumatic Events cluster deals with dramatic and often sudden changes that occur in one's world, and which effect (or have the potential to effect one) adversly. This cluster includes three factors: (1) mobility/change; (2) loss and, (3) crisis.

Mobility/Change focuses on the change in one's world which is related to, and caused by, mobility, uprooting, and transfer from one place to another, and its adverse effect on the individual.

Loss addresses a significant or traumatic loss that occurred in one's world. This may include loss of a significant and imtimate relationship. Examples of such

losses include divorce, break-up of a close relationship, death of a spouse, loss of a friend, or loss of a special relationship one had. The loss referred to here is permanent and not transitory in nature.

Crisis refers to a trauma or a significant, dramatic and sometimes abrupt change in one's world, such as a crisis.

Characterological and Developmental Variables. This cluster highlights the more personal causes of loneliness. It refers to personal characteristics or experiences and to developmental history and their effect on one's experiences of loneliness. Addressed here are characteristics that would prevent one from enjoying a good, close relationship, and the familial origins that precipitate the individual's diminished ability to deal with loneliness as an adult. The present cluster includes two factors: (a) personal shortcomings, and (b) developmental deficits.

Personal shortcomings include the real, or perceived, characterological features that would contribute to

one's feelings of not belonging, and of not being worthy of others' attention and company.

Developmental Deficits is a factor which addresses the historical and familial origin of adult loneliness. It includes the less-than-ideal conditions at home, or even lack of a home, which are seen as causes for the loneliness felt in adulthood.

FREQUENCY OF ANTECEDENTS

Results of the present study suggest four factors as the most common in causing loneliness: Loss (20.4% of all reported causes), Inadequate social support system (17.7%), Personal shortcomings (16.2%), and Crisis (14.2%). Loss of a significant one through either death or relational breakup is closest to the concept of "loneliness in death and dying" which Mayer Gaev (1976) described. While Mayer Gaev specifically emphasized death as a source of loneliness, the present study found that loss in general, and not necessarily through death, was seen as the most common cause of loneliness.

Inadequate social support system is similar to what Weiss (1973) referred to as "loneliness of social

isolation" which is precipitated by the absence of an engaging social network, and can be overcome only by access to such a network. Sadler & Johnson (1980) describe this type of loneliness as one where (and I quote) "the individual affectively perceives that he has been shoved out, left out, shut out, shipped out, kept out or lost sight of. In terms of self awareness he sees himself as an outcast, an outsider, a loner, an oddball, or a disconnected individual".

In contrast, "personal shortcomings" addresses a subjective, cognitively modulated experience, one which is precipitated by negative self perceptions and real competence deficits. Peplau, Miceli & Morasch (1982), the leading proponents of the cognitive approach similarly suggested that low self-esteem and social incompetence may interfere with initiating or maintaining satisfying social relations and may thus result in loneliness.

"Crisis" with its "awareness of life's limitations and structure" is closest to what Moustakas (1961) addressed when he referred to the essence and antecedents of

loneliness. He sees loneliness as an existential phenomenon since it is so central to being human, to being aware of oneself, and to (I quote) "facing ultimate experiences of upheaval, tragedy and change".

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